

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Romans 11:13-15, 29-32; and Matthew 15:21-28

George Floyd's murder has drawn white Americans' attention to the issue of racism. As I learn more about it, I have realized that I participate in racism. This makes me squirm. It runs contrary to my self-image, that I am a good person who tries to imitate God's universal love. Experts, like moral theologian [Fr. Brian Massingale](#) and [Dr. Robin DiAngelo](#), encourage me to sit with my squirming, because it is only in that discomfort that I can be open to real conversion, without which change is impossible.

Another related challenge is that although I am working on some important issues, I also need to pay attention to racism. All too frequently, the people with the power defer working on rooting out prejudice because they are too busy. Similarly, Matthew's gospel addresses some important issues but ignores others. The author was smart enough to realize it and built in some stories to trip us up, making us tune into those ignored issues. This gospel was most likely written as Christians were realizing they needed to separate completely from Judaism. The Jewish-Christian leaders, educated men of privilege, were busy working on a complex task. We are grateful for what they did, as we receive the results, brilliantly embodied in Matthew's retelling of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

What issues got ignored? Prejudice against women, for one. By way of contrast, we find many stories of women in Luke and John, but in Matthew we only find "bread crumb trails," hard to follow but leading us home. He includes five women in Jesus' male-dominated genealogy. If the male lineage is so important, why note five rule-breaking women? Matthew ends the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand with the phrase "not counting the women and children." If we aren't going to count them, why point it out? Perhaps Matthew is prompting us to tackle sexism, since he could not.

So here we have this awful story of the Canaanite woman. She is a foreigner. She is a woman. She asks for help on behalf of another woman, her daughter. A proper Jewish-Christian man would not speak to her and her concerns would in no way be his. Jesus' disdainful language would have been normal things for a Jewish-Christian man to say. However, everything else we know about Jesus tells us he challenged people to be inclusive. If he actually used this common, cruel language – or if Matthew put these words in Jesus' mouth – perhaps the goal was to gob-smack the audience into realizing how horrific their prejudice was.

So what? The Jewish-Gentile division and the divisions of patriarchal Jewish society are not relevant to us. Ah, but don't we have these same divisions today and more? White vs. people of color. Men vs. women. Rich vs. poor. Conservative vs. liberal. Those who wear masks vs. those who won't. We use disdainful language to describe each other and our buddies confirm what we say. Sometimes we are even rude enough to say it to our opponents. Can we really picture Jesus saying what we are saying?

The Canaanite woman stands up to a monolith of prejudice. Matthew links her to other holy people with his language: Countless times he has already drawn our attention to unexpected goodness with the phrase, "And behold!" The blind men in chapter 20 will also call out, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David." The Magi also "came and did Jesus homage." The woman herself is persistent and clever. She calls Jesus "Lord" four times, making clear her humble recognition of her need for him. Jesus, sounding more like himself, concludes, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Remarkable! God aligns God's will with hers. No surprise there; God already wanted the same things: justice, healing and sacrifice for others. (Remember, she puts up with this humiliation for her daughter.) The Canaanite woman moved beyond the prejudice that creates division. God is also beyond these divisions, as Isaiah and Romans attest. It is time for us to take a long, hard look at our prejudices. And if doing so makes us squirm, that is a good thing.

- ❖ It has been over two months since George Floyd's murder. What are you doing to help end racism?
- ❖ Imagine your words about an opponent on Jesus' lips. Talk with Jesus about these words.